

4. Islamic Hermeneutics

Now we can turn to the question of whether we should expect an Islamic hermeneutics to be governed by any distinctive principles of its own. We might begin with the idea of a religious or "sacred" hermeneutics, and then try to narrow this down further to an Islamic and then a Shi'ite hermeneutics. Most writing on religious hermeneutics is about how to interpret religious texts or other phenomena. Thus, we have, for example, the work on hermeneutics and theology of Rudolf Bultmann, which attempts to "demythologize" our interpretation of religious texts and events.

The demythologizing program proposed by Bultmann is designed to show how a plausible reading of scripture can be given that strips away from it what a modern sensibility would find incredible.¹ A diametrically opposed view of how to interpret scripture is proposed by Alvin Plantinga, who favors an interpretation based on principles of faith, and argues that this need not involve one in any fallacious question begging.²

In addition to advice about how to read scripture, however, both Bultmann and Plantinga also offer suggestions about the proper manner in which to interpret things, such as history and other cultures, in accordance with religious beliefs, which we might call "religious hermeneutics."

Bultmann follows Heidegger and suggests an existentialist hermeneutics in which one's own existence is risked through the activity of interpretation. By risking one's existence, what Bultmann seems to have in mind is to allow oneself to be affected by what one interprets in unforeseeable ways. Hermeneutics is seen as a way of questioning the object of inquiry, whether a text, a work of art, or historical events. To operate with a religious hermeneutics is to allow oneself to be guided by religious ideas when one poses questions,

*....as when one asks, for example, about "salvation," or about the "meaning" of one's personal life or of history, or about the norms of moral action and of order in human community, and the like.. The point, then, is not to eliminate the preunderstanding but to risk it, to raise it to the level of consciousness, and to test it critically in understanding the text. In short, in questioning the text one must allow oneself to be questioned by the text and to give heed to its claim.*³

Of course, Bultmann speaks here of interpreting texts, but the point applies generally to interpretation, and the quoted passage is immediately followed by a discussion of historical understanding. Bultmann argues that any understanding of texts or historical phenomena will rely on our presuppositions, but this is no threat to objectivity, since the result of the inquiry is not presupposed but left open. Bultmann describes his conception of a religious hermeneutics as follows:

.understanding reports of events as the act of God presupposes a preunderstanding of what in general can be called God's act—as distinct, say, from the acts of human beings or from natural events.. Unless our existence were moved (consciously or unconsciously) by the question about God., we would not be able to recognize God as God in any revelation. There is an existential knowledge of God present and alive in human existence in the question about "happiness" or "salvation" or about the meaning of the world and of history, insofar as this is the question about the authenticity of our own existence.[4](#)

For Bultmann, and, following him, for van Fraassen, the development of a religious hermeneutics is not a matter of how the world is to be described in theories or beliefs, but in the attitude with which we approach the world and how we relate to our experiences.[5](#)

Plantinga, on the other hand, questions the view of science developed in the works of Bultmann and van Fraassen, and in so doing, he offers an alternative religious hermeneutics (although he does not call it that). According to Plantinga, objectifying inquiry, as described by Bultmann and van Fraassen, operates within the confines of methodological naturalism. Methodological naturalism is not ontological or philosophical naturalism.

The latter holds that nature, the object of inquiry in the natural sciences, is all there is. Methodological naturalism, on the other hand, is neutral about the question of supernatural existence, but maintains that in the practice of science, one should proceed as though there were no supernatural entities. This means that a scientific account of some phenomenon cannot appeal to such things as the will of God, divine attributes, or angels. There are a variety of ways that methodological naturalism can be elaborated. Some, for example, hold that it requires the banishment of final causes or teleology from scientific discourse.[6](#)

However characterized, Plantinga proposes the development of a Christian way of interpretation and of doing science that rejects the requirement of methodological naturalism, at least for some parts of science; and his suggestions indicate that the rejection of methodological naturalism would be most appropriate where hermeneutics is most needed, that is, where questions of interpretation are at issue.

What the Christian community really needs is a science that takes into account what we know as Christians. Indeed, this seems the rational thing in any event; surely the rational thing is to use all that you know in trying to understand a given phenomenon. But then in coming to a scientific understanding of hostility, or aggression, for example, should not Christian psychologists make use of the notion of sin? In trying to achieve scientific understanding of love in its many and protean manifestations, for

example, or play, or music, or humor, or our sense of adventure, should not we also use what we know about human beings being created in the image of God, who is himself the very source of love, beauty and the like? And the same for morality?⁷

These "religious" ideas might take place in our science by way of explicitly entering various hypotheses. They might also play other roles: for example they might be part of the background information with respect to which we evaluate the various scientific hypotheses and myths that come our way.⁸

Plantinga considers various arguments in favor of methodological naturalism, and concludes that although some areas of science may best be conducted in accord with methodological naturalism, there are a number of areas in which methodological naturalism should be rejected.

These statements are consistent with some of the claims reviewed earlier about the Islamization of the sciences, and suggest steps for the development of a religious hermeneutics. Religious hermeneutics may make various religious assumptions explicit, on the basis of which it will offer its interpretations. Secondly, religious hermeneutics may make use of religious background information in order to evaluate hypotheses and theories. Plantinga's work also suggests that there may be cases in which the description of the object of inquiry may be best understood in religious terms.

A third approach to religious hermeneutics is that proposed in the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The position taken by Nasr is more extreme than that of Plantinga. Plantinga does not reject secular hermeneutics tout court as Nasr does. He merely reserves the right of the religious researcher to bring religious beliefs and attitudes to bear on the interpretation of texts and other phenomena. Nasr, on the other hand, sees modern science as infected by atheistic presuppositions.

Modern science is to be replaced by a sacred science that is integrated with a Traditionalist view of metaphysics and epistemology, so that it will offer a unified view of humanity, the world, and divinity, integrated with such metaphysical principles as the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, ontological hierarchy (what Arthur Lovejoy called "The Great Chain of Being"⁹), teleological principles, and much else that would be thoroughly rejected as unscientific by those who consider science bound to methodological naturalism.

This is not the place to adjudicate the conflicts between the views of Bultmann, van Fraassen, Plantinga, and Nasr. By considering how they treat issues pertaining to interpretation, however, we may suggest three grades of religious hermeneutics.

I. Religious hermeneutics that is exclusively at this level does not allow one to make pronouncements about objective facts, the description and explanation of which are to be left to objectifying inquiry. Religious hermeneutics is concerned with the subjective dimension of the phenomena, of how they are taken to be related to one's own life and existence.

II. Religious hermeneutics operates on several levels in which there may be occasion to suspend the

methodological naturalism that normally governs objectifying inquiry:

- a) the description of phenomena may be irreducibly religious;
- b) religious background information and other principles may be used to evaluate competing hypotheses or theories;
- c) irreducibly religious language may be used in the construction of the theories used to explain phenomena, and irreducibly religious concepts and presuppositions may be used to provide an understanding of texts and phenomena.

Specific religious principles, concepts, and other elements may be used as an organizing basis for the development of a "sacred science", which will become a part of a coherent and integrated religious worldview.

In the above sketch of three grades of religious involvement in hermeneutics, there is no intention of suggesting that the first grade is a watered down version of religious hermeneutics to be superseded by the subsequent ones. The grades are distinguished by the extent to which they (potentially) oppose the findings of objectifying inquiry or the dominant modern science. The question of which grade of religious involvement is appropriate may well differ from one area of interpretive activity to another. It may also turn out that the sort of religious involvement that will have the furthest reaching impact on the direction the sciences will take will be that proposed by Bultmann; but this issue cannot be pursued any further here.

Specifically denominational hermeneutics will be species of the generic religious hermeneutics sketched above, although the most revealing classifications of such hermeneutics may not be along denominational lines. For example, a hermeneutics based on a Christian view that presupposes Biblical literalism may be more akin to a Salafi hermeneutics, than to other varieties of Christian hermeneutics.

Further refinements of Islamic hermeneutics can be found through the examination of the works of a number of scholars who have sought to understand Islamic intellectual traditions and authors, and to apply them to contemporary debates about science, ethics, politics, society, and other areas. Here I will only very briefly mention two examples, each of which has its own particular importance: Leo Strauss and William Chittick, both of whom make points that must be taken into consideration in order to avoid misunderstandings.

In a number of books and articles, William Chittick has advocated the recovery and development of an Islamic understanding of God, world, and man. [10](#) Chittick draws heavily on Traditionalist literature, but is not content with nostalgia and condemnation of the moderns. By way of example, he provides a list of principles gleaned from the Islamic intellectual tradition upon which interpretation and understanding can be based. While prevented by limitations of length from considering these points in detail, several of the claims Chittick makes deserve emphasis.

First, an Islamic hermeneutics will only develop through the recovery of Islamic intellectual sciences. The exclusive focus of Muslims on the transmitted sciences and on a politics of Islamic identity has inhibited the ability of Muslims to think for themselves and apply their intellects to finding the haqq of things in the world and in themselves. [11](#)

Second, an Islamic hermeneutics must be based on the awareness that the sort of understanding provided by its interpretations is no mere accumulation of facts whose aim is control over objects; rather, its aim is wisdom, and wisdom goes beyond what is considered knowledge in the prevalent scientific worldview. The rejection of scientism and the recognition that one's understanding cannot be simply taken over from some textual source by imitation are also characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition.

It is important to distinguish scientism from modern science. We might have criticisms of how modern science is conducted, of the institutions that support and direct scientific research, or of the way that research is evaluated, but the accusation that modern science claims that no knowledge is legitimate except that which meets the standards of modern science misses the mark.

Modern science makes no claims about the legitimacy of metaphysical principles or of beliefs based on knowledge by presence or on the *sensus divinitatis*. Such claims about the legitimacy of various sorts of philosophical propositions require argumentation that goes beyond the theories and research findings of the sciences themselves. To his credit, Dr. Nasr has been careful to make this distinction:

You know that I have always criticized Western scientism, but I have never said that we have the choice of not mastering the modern sciences. I have said that we have to absorb Western science within our own worldview and try to criticize it and also integrate and digest it within our own culture and intellectual tradition. [12](#)

Leo Strauss developed a hermeneutics that he sought to apply to the texts of Plato, Farabi, Spinoza, and a number of other philosophers. In his hermeneutics, Strauss attempted to defend a classical philosophical understanding of society and politics against what he took to be the misunderstandings of various modern thinkers. Strauss and Gadamer were on friendly terms, although they disagreed on a number of points, as well. [13](#)

One of the points emphasized by Strauss and conceded by Gadamer was the importance of recognizing how a text may contain a hidden message. Strauss took the presence of contradictions in a text to indicate that the author had a hidden message that conflicts with the outward one the reader would be expected to obtain from a superficial reading of the text. Gadamer objects that the presence of contradictions may indicate other things, such as, that the subject discussed cannot be expressed within the confines of logic. Be this as it may, it is certainly to the credit of Strauss to point out the importance of layers of meaning that may confront the reader of texts in the Islamic tradition, since this implies that an Islamic hermeneutics must be ready to offer multiple interpretations of the objects of its study, whether texts or social phenomena.

- [1.](#) See Bultman (1985), *passim*. It is important to recognize that Bultmann's program of demythologizing is not to be confused with a secularization of textual interpretation. See van Fraassen (2002), 187–189.
- [2.](#) See Plantinga (1998).
- [3.](#) Bultmann (1985), 84.
- [4.](#) Bultmann (1985), 87.
- [5.](#) van Fraassen (2002), 194.
- [6.](#) For more detailed development of the varieties of methodological naturalism, see Plantinga (2009), and Plantinga (1996).
- [7.](#) Plantinga (1996), 192.
- [8.](#) Plantinga (1996), 193.
- [9.](#) See Lovejoy (1936). This survey makes it clear that the sorts of principles that Nasr would use as a basis for sacred science are themselves subject to diverse interpretations.
- [10.](#) For example, Chittick (1998) and Chittick (2007).
- [11.](#) Chittick (2007), 46.
- [12.](#) Nasr (2010), 115–116. The writer of the introduction to this volume, Terry Moore, is not so subtle, as he writes of "the totalitarian claims of modern science." Nasr (2010), xiii, see also xxvi.
- [13.](#) See the appendix to the second addition of *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer (1993), 414–424; Gadamer (2004), 529–537; also Gadamer (1984), and Strauss and Gadamer (1978).

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